

Pointers Towards A Popular Church In Britain

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Peru has a Left-wing daily paper called *El Diario de Marka*. On the day after Pope John Paul issued his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* the paper carried a cartoon covering most of its front page which summed up its view of the significance of the encyclical for the Peruvian situation. It showed a determined looking Pope John Paul carrying a banner which read: "Free Trade Unions, Right to Strike, Co-Ownership of the Means of Production and Just Remuneration, Social Justice". He was bearing down on a rather smug President Belaunde who stood with a banner behind his back saying "Anti-Strike Decree" and thinking "Terrorist".

The fact that such a cartoon would even appear in a Left-wing paper, let alone cover most of its front page, indicates the importance of the popular church for the Peruvian Left. This was further underlined by the amount of space and the sympathetic coverage the paper gave the encyclical in marked contrast to that given by the bourgeois press. Nor is this simply a recognition of the large number of Christians who are trade union and political militants. Perhaps more important is the new image this has given the church and the consequent expectation that a papal statement on social justice would be a broadly Left-wing document.

Occasions such as this serve to show just how significant is the popular church, both politically and ecclesiologically. Not only is it new to find large sectors of the church being the natural allies of political progressives but it is even more novel to find that this alliance has caused secular progressives to re-evaluate the meaning of Christianity itself and to come to expect that even some of its more conservative leaders must themselves be progressive if they choose to criticise society from a Christian standpoint. I feel it is not too exaggerated to claim that this new understanding of Christianity and model of church is an ecclesiastical revolution equal in importance at the very least to the Reformation of the 16th century and arguably of even greater historical significance.

There can be little doubt among progressive Christians at home that it is to Latin America particularly and, in a lesser way, to parts of Asia and Africa that we must look to find our ideas of what the church should be being worked out in practice among the grass-roots of the church. While many fine ideas may have come

from Western European and North American christian groups these have influenced only a small elite in the church (among them at times bishops and other leaders). In parts of Latin America, on the other hand, a process has been evolved which has transformed whole grass-roots sectors of the church, caused dioceses to re-organise themselves in completely new ways, given rise to the growth of new cell structures superseding the parish, brought local church leadership under effective lay control and has projected the church into a new world of struggle and persecution.

My four previous articles sought to describe how this process has worked in practice in four very different countries: Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. In this final article, then, I want to draw out more explicitly the lessons we can learn from seeing this process in practice. I will begin by elaborating on six basic themes common to the four churches I have examined and basic to any process of the growth of a popular church. This will lead me on to a discussion of how we might relate these to our situation and finally I will refer to what I see as some of the distinctive problems in our Western European situation to which we will have to find our own approach as they don't arise in the Latin American context.

Six Basic Themes:

Common to the different contexts and strategies moulding the growth of the popular church in the varied countries of Latin America is a shared approach to political and ecclesiological issues. These I categorise under the following headings: 1) A Church Incarnate; 2) A Service to Liberation; 3) Respect for the Poor; 4) Political Project; 5) Communitarian model, and 6) Ecclesial Sense. While this doesn't claim to be exhaustive it does serve to highlight some of the more important aspects.

1) A Church Incarnate: Fundamental to the growth of any people's church is the willingness of the church to immerse itself in the life conditions and problems of the people. Though this is an obvious point many Latin American church leaders are critical of the extent to which our churches in the developed world succeed in doing it. A very valid criticism they often make is that we are very good at taking up *their* problems but tend to be naively uncritical of the fact that the roots of their problems lie under our noses in the great power centres of London, Washington, New York, Paris, Brussels etc. Immersing oneself in the life of the people rather than of the elites (it is among the latter that the church has traditionally been more at home), demands not simply an effort to make pragmatic responses to deprivation but, far more importantly, it demands a rigorous analysis of the root causes of that deprivation not just on a local level but on a global level also.

2) A Service to Liberation: Such an undertaking implies having a

clear view of the primary role of the church. Not only is it inadequate to acknowledge that the church should not be overly concerned with its own institutional perpetuation but it must be clearly affirmed, as it so often is by Latin American church leaders, that the church's primary task is as a service to the liberation of the oppressed. This contemporary formulation of a traditional phrase such as "the redemption of the world" demands a transformation of all sectors of the life of the church within this renewed understanding of its commitment. Therefore a commitment to social justice cannot be seen as just another optional extra for those Christians who happen to be interested in it.

3) **Respect for the Poor:** Defining how the church exercises this role of service to the liberation of the oppressed is a profound respect for the poor. This involves a close dialectical relationship with the poor, listening and sharing with them and, in turn, giving them the tools to appropriate and act on their experience. In Latin America one often hears bishops and theologians saying they have learned the Gospel from the poor and this is no empty phrase. Through the sophisticated use of techniques of conscientisation the poor are facilitated to define their own political agenda and act on it. Seeing such an approach in action shows up in a particularly stark way just how much intellectual and political elites define progressive political projects for both church and society here in Western Europe. Far from having a respect for the people's culture, progressives very often dismiss valued cultural practices as being an expression of oppression without trying to find possible liberating elements within them. Perhaps nowhere has this been more true than among elite progressive church groups.

4) **Political project:** Moving close to the poor brings the church into relationship with the often ambiguous political world to be found there. This, of course, is the world of marxism in its different political expressions as well as different local variants of populism. This is a world very foreign for most Christians and relating to it poses many difficulties. However, as Puebla said, "the church feels it has a duty and a right to be present in this area of reality" in order to "enlighten consciences and to proclaim a message that is capable of transforming society". Faithful to this call of the church Christians in marginalised areas therefore involve themselves in groups which seek to implement this transformation of society while also being careful to safeguard the autonomy and primacy of their faith. The strength of their faith helps them to keep clear the goal of transforming society according to the scale of values of the Gospel rather than falling into the temptation of seeking power for its own sake. I know of no instance in the developed world where one could make the claim that large sectors of

marginalised christians are involved in political activity while maintaining the clear primacy of their faith (though it would be very interesting to know to what extent it applied in the Polish situation).

5) Communitarian model: What ensures the autonomy of christian faith in this maelstrom of political debate and activity is the strength of the basic communities to which christian political activists belong. Within the context of the revolutionary struggle these provide the locus for prayer, for deepening theological understanding and for evaluating political actions in the light of christian faith. And far from being moderating influences these communities serve to deepen and radicalise political commitment and to mobilise wider support for the struggle. In this way a communitarian model of church becomes an essential factor for the effective insertion of the church in the political struggle. Without such an ecclesial base it becomes very difficult to avoid either allowing a dualism to develop between faith and politics or else defining one's faith by one's politics as happens in practice for many politically committed christians in Western Europe.

6) Ecclesial sense: A vital dimension of the self-understanding of the popular church is what can be called its ecclesial sense. By this is meant that this sector of the church does not see itself as being in opposition to more traditional sectors but rather as calling these other sectors to greater fidelity to the gospel. This is an important stress as it guards against conservative bishops' tendencies to feel threatened by it and therefore seek to suppress it. In practice it means that the popular church is careful not to alienate conservative sectors unnecessarily by, for example, engaging in confrontatory tactics and is very ready to lend support to any bishop or christian group when they speak out on social issues in a broadly acceptable way. This sensitivity goes so far at times that grass-roots progressive groups prefer not to use the term 'popular church' as they fear it implies a claim to be a parallel church.

To a greater or lesser extent, therefore, these six basic themes are present wherever christians in Latin America have developed a liberating response to their socio-political situation. This does not mean, of course, that a theoretical model has been elaborated which is then applied to a local context. The complete opposite is the case in fact. This model of church and its insertion in the political struggles of the oppressed has been developed through being faithful to the dialectic of reading the Bible in the light of one's everyday reality and bringing its insights to bear on that reality. In developing the model in one situation the strengths and weaknesses of other churches' experiences began to offer lessons and in this way a certain uniformity of model has become obvious. But at best it is

a provisional model constantly developing and growing and constantly having new demands made on it.

Pointers Towards a Popular Church:

Having drawn out some of the more obvious points about the four churches I have been examining I now want to move on to examine how they apply to our situation. This I will do under two headings: the need to define a popular project and the need to get closer to the popular culture.

A) Define project: Perhaps the greatest difficulty hindering the growth of a popular church in Britain is the lack of any definition of what this might mean. With a multiplicity of issues raising their heads, progressive christians seem to channel their energies into different issue groups modelled along the lines of the different pressure groups which play such an important part in our liberal capitalist society. Thus there are christian feminist groups, christian Third World groups, christian peace groups, christian groups against racism, christian gay groups. While the involvement of christians in any of these issues is obviously very important the fragmentation into separate groups tends to prevent any uncovering of the fundamental social causes of the malaise which all these groups are, in their separate ways, concerned with.

For both political and theological reasons such an approach is far from adequate. Politically it assumes that these problems can be solved within the general framework of existing society (though individuals or groups may become convinced after investigation and study that this is not the case) and, in isolating particular problems, it fragments the human condition in a way foreign to the biblical writers (can this be the modern equivalent of the body/soul dichotomy which has so domesticated christian theology down the ages?).

It is urgently necessary to break out of these fragmented strait jackets imposed on us by capitalist society and to facilitate an examination of the human condition not limited to any one aspect of it. The best people to do this are, of course, those suffering most from it who can more authentically explore the causes of oppression than those of us who benefit from the way society is structured. Since basic causes will only be truly uncovered by those who can experience in practice the illusory nature of solutions which don't grapple with the fundamental issues of power and control, this process needs to proceed through a dialectical approach of analysis and action and further analysis of the action. For christians, involvement in this process demands the added element of allowing Scripture and Tradition to illuminate the search in an authentic way. The only structure adequate to this process is the basic community; a group not just committed

to doing a single task together but committed to their common liberation in some stable way.

Until the involvement of christians in social change is grounded primarily in experience rather than intellectual analysis and until this becomes a commitment to changing the structures which embody sin rather than just creating space so that they are less destructive (whether this involves sexual and racial identity or distribution of wealth and power) the hard and dedicated work being put in by so many individuals and groups will not be feeding into a wider unity of approach. In other words all we are doing will not be facilitating the growth of a new way of living as church which is an effective leaven for the liberation of the oppressed. This, it appears to me, is the situation we find ourselves in today: much effort is put into liberalising political and ecclesiastical structures whereas the real need is to create totally new ones. This is the clear lesson of the Latin American popular church.

Defining our project therefore means being clear on what we are trying to do. Are the groups we fashion modelled on existing society or are they the seeds of a new church at the service of a new world? Are our expectations of liberation taken from the prevailing liberal world-view or are they being influenced by the far more radical liberation which is at the heart of the christian message? Are we satisfied with partial solutions to partial problems or are we feeding into wider movements which can be seen as the action of the liberating God at this point in our history?

B) Relate to the popular culture: Fashioning a common project to unite all these strands of fragmented work must involve a closer relationship to those who are on the margins of society in the way that few christians who involve themselves in groups orientated towards social change are. This itself is a comment on just how elitist are the issues which most of these groups are involved in (not so much at the level of content, more at the level of how the issues are dealt with). Moving closer to the marginalised poses a challenge to the church at different levels.

i) Pastoral strategy: It is remarkable just how rarely clergy and church workers ever plan their pastoral work. The legacy of 'the cure of souls' still dominates a pastoral approach oriented in the main towards a type of 'spiritual counselling', providing words of comfort at times of suffering and keeping a minimal link with the local parish. As a kind of optional extra, issued-oriented groups (whether it is to learn more about the faith or to help the poor in a variety of ways) are provided for the more committed. While this approach incorporates certain positive factors it is based upon the involvement of as many people as possible in a structure of church organisation which is manifestly inadequate to the challenges of

christian faith in our times, namely the parish.

The growth of new community structures which involve marginalised people, therefore, involves a re-definition of the parish and a whole new pastoral approach. This, as it has been worked out in practice in Latin America, concentrates on the identification of where communities could grow, on the accompanying of communities in the process of growth and on providing services such as leadership training courses for fully developed communities. Such a strategy involves pastoral teams planning long-term and more immediate goals, ways to achieve those goals and the priorities of particular groups with which to work. This priority has been made at the highest level in Latin America, the Puebla conference of representatives of all the continent's episcopacies, as a 'preferential option for the poor'. Christians of other social classes are then invited to be converted to taking on the cause of the poor "as if they were accepting and taking up their own cause, the cause of Christ himself," as the words of Puebla put it. This priority seems to me to be the only way to remain faithful to belief in a God who became poor for us.

ii) Conscientisation: Fostering local communities, even those of the oppressed themselves, demands that these communities be enabled to understand the causes of their oppression and put words on their hope. Poor people, far from being able to do this by virtue of being so oppressed, are usually very submissive to their marginalised and powerless situation and therefore need well-developed methods to help them open their eyes to their oppression in ways that really do uncover what *their* experience is rather than providing them with an intellectual analysis which may be just more mental baggage.

The revolution in educational methodology initiated by Paulo Freire has probably been the single most important factor in the growth of the consciousness of the Latin American popular church. The challenge of applying this to a developed situation is far from easy; but it is a necessary challenge to take up if a network of basic communities is to confront successfully the prevailing domesticating ideology. It is the very strength and prevalence of this ideology in our more controlled societies and its constant reinforcement through the media, advertising, the educational system and the churches which makes the task more difficult than it is for the marginalised of Latin America. Even the way that people perceive their grievances as fragmented issues and organise against them in interest groups is itself a measure of the success of the ruling ideology. A network of basic communities is therefore a potential challenge to this but to translate this potential into reality will demand a lot of work on elaborating methodologies and producing

simple booklets and other illustrated materials for the use of these communities.

iii) Theology: Prioritising pastoral work with the poor and organising them into communities to uncover the root causes of their oppression from a christian perspective of liberation provides rich new opportunities for theology. It is through contact with this world of the struggling poor that Latin American theology has been changed. This is true not only in the sense that it has set a new agenda for theology but also in that through responding to this agenda theology has become of vital interest to the oppressed themselves. This possibility, of course, is nothing new for British christians with the rich tradition of Winstanley and the Diggers, or, in the last century, the contribution of the chapels to the growth of the labour movement.

Responding to this new agenda has much to offer theology. Perhaps foremost in this would be a new awareness of the extent to which much theology is deeply conditioned by a prevailing liberal ideology and consequently a greater critical spirit towards its social role as well as its social presuppositions. A good example of the way in which theology takes up the experience of the poor as well as educating them theologically is provided by the summer schools in theology organised by the Catholic University in Lima which is described in my article on the church in Peru. It is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility that a similar experiment could be started by a theological faculty in Britain.

iv) Political project: The growth of a theologically literate network of basic communities would pose in practice an issue already raised in this article, namely the relationship of this new movement with existing political movements. Where would such a movement find its political expression? With the current re-alignment in British politics such a question takes on intriguing possibilities. With the existing divisions in the Labour Party appearing to show yet again the enormous difficulties in even defining what an alternative political project which could command widespread support in our developed capitalist societies could be, a developed network of grass-roots communities could have a significant contribution to offer. It could uncover the elitist and sectarian nature of much Left-wing politics and mobilise more grass-roots support from sectors which have traditionally tended to be far from radical. In seeking to formulate in theory the political significance of the popular church, it could be claimed with little exaggeration that in Latin America christian communities are the focal point for an alternative vision of society. It is difficult to see where there is anything analogous to be found in Britain yet it is also difficult to envisage how a fundamental shift of power and control can happen in soci-

ety until such a grass-roots network exists.

Conclusion:

Such an observation brings us back to the need to define towards what specific ecclesial and political project our work is leading. While the nature of this will only be discovered in the practice of its own growth, my suggestion is that defining it as the project of the growth of a popular church with all its potential political significance will give a new and much needed focus to existing groups and pastoral approaches. Refusing such a definition is being less than faithful to the clear injunction to seek the Kingdom above all the fragmented and partial goals for which we might be working.

In the difficult process of trying to implement such a project in the British situation we are going to meet factors peculiar to our cultural, religious and political situation which are not found in Latin America. Whether these will in practice become major hindrances cannot be foreseen but they should be stated at the outset. The major ones for me are the problems of secularisation, of liberalism and of defining who the poor are.

The profound religious roots of Latin American culture which make religious faith a very natural part of everyday life (though often with many syncretistic elements) has been a factor greatly facilitating the growth of the popular church. The more marginal role of the church in our society and the greater difficulties which religious faith presents for many are distinctive factors which may pose their own limitation to such a process in Britain. Similarly the profound impact of liberalism on our political culture which has had the effect of domesticating all radical political projects and of privatising the political, presents deeply-rooted barriers.

While these factors of our religious and political culture can only be overcome in practice there is a third distinctive feature of our situation which would warrant some initial examination. This is the simple but complex question of who the poor are in Britain today. It seems a deep-rooted tendency for Christians (notably clergy and church leaders) to obfuscate this issue by talk of 'the spiritually poor'. The same tendency existed to a lesser extent in Latin America and was given a clear response at Puebla by its description of the "very concrete faces" of the poor: the Indian peoples, the peasants, the under-employed and unemployed, the marginalised old people. Such an authoritative description is even more urgent for us where poverty is far more hidden. However, in its root sense of powerlessness, poverty is extensive in our societies also though the illusion of power is pervasive. Defining who are the powerless is a necessary starting point for a popular church.

The perspective offered in this series of articles is not so much a call to copy what is happening in Latin America as an attempt to use it as a way of clarifying what we want to happen at home. Thus the description of the process of the growth of the popular church in four countries of the southern part of the continent is not offered as an academic exercise in church history, nor as inviting solidarity with oppressed christians there. These christians would, for obvious reasons, be little interested in the first of these and even the second is not the most important thing they wish to see us do. Rather through meeting church leaders, theologians and numerous groups of grass-roots christians all over Latin America one clear demand comes through: Why do you not get involved in radically transforming your societies in the way we are trying to do with ours?

In the eyes of many Latin American christians the churches in the developed world appear to have accommodated themselves by and large to a type of society very foreign to many of the central values of the Gospel. Understanding their struggles to apply these values to their societies and the suffering and persecution which this entails should help us to look at the relationship between church and society with new eyes and inspire us to break out of the privatisation of our faith in more vigorous ways. It is as a contribution to further such an important task that this series was written.



Note of Clarification

Some false impressions which could have been created by my article on the Church in Peru (*New Blackfriars*, October 1981) have been brought to my attention and since these could pose serious problems for the work of sectors of the church there it is important that I clarify them.

The first of these concerns the link between sectors of the church and a marxist political option. By quoting two people at the beginning of the article I may have given the impression that marxism is accepted without any problem by many christians. This would be a gross oversimplification of the complex relationship between faith and political commitment as I experienced it in Peru. While a renewed understanding of their faith has led many christians to realise its political implications it is through the influence of the Puebla documents and such papal encyclicals as *Octogesima Adveniens* and *Laborem Exercens* that these christians' political orientation has been formed. The emphasis that these documents give to the responsibility of christians to struggle for the transformation of society does lead some christians to co-oper-

ate with marxists on specific tasks but the striking thing about the political commitment of these christians is the primacy and strength of their faith which leads them to be critical of many aspects of marxism. Any impression my article might have given that christian faith is put at the service of a marxist political project or that christians accept marxism without any difficulty is entirely false and would be doing a great disservice to the maturity and primacy of christian faith for those I wrote about.

The second possible misconception concerns pastoral orientation. If my article gave the impression that the grass-roots church elaborates its own pastoral orientation somehow divorced from the guidance of the bishops, that is not what I intended to communicate. While it would be false to imply that there are no tensions between different models of the church operative in Peru as there are in the Catholic Church throughout the world this does not mean that there is a 'grass-roots' church opposed to that of the bishops. Rather, as I have emphasised elsewhere in this series of articles, what is striking about the commitment of christians in marginalised areas is their strong ecclesial sense and fidelity to the orientation given by local bishops and by the Pope. It is within the guidelines of this orientation that the various groups I described in the article operate and not in some way autonomous from them or opposed to them.

These possible misconceptions themselves serve to underline just how difficult it is to describe for christians in the developed world the new strength and maturity of the faith in many parts of Latin America. One searches to find ways of describing it which do not allow its importance to be under-rated. It is unfortunate, indeed, and completely opposed to my intention in writing this series, if my attempt not to domesticate the reality I experienced led to any impression that christian faith is losing its autonomy or the church is being instrumentalised.